‘Unpacking’ assignments and making initial plans

The following exercises are designed to enable students and staff to develop better shared understandings concerning the purposes and expectations for assessment, and also to help students develop their approaches to assignments.

**Activity: Anonymous questions about forthcoming assignment**

Ask students to write (anonymously) questions regarding the assignment. Depending on the type of assignment it might be helpful to suggest specific themes for the questions. *Anonymity will generally yield more questions and also help get over any fear students might have regarding the kinds questions they can raise.* Once these questions have been submitted, you can use these as a basis of a broader discussion around the questions that have emerged. Where larger groups are concerned it might be helpful to group them into broader themes before discussing them. They can also provide you with some insights into how students are making sense of the assignments and assignment instructions you provide.

**Activity: Making sense of the assignment title and/or brief**

Give students approximately 10-15 minutes to work with an assignment title/brief. Ask them to come up with a provisional plan for how they intend to approach the assignment. Invite them to think, in particular, about:

- What the assignment is really asking them to do (*E.g. if it’s an essay, what are the key words or instructions embedded in the question/title?*)
- What further research they will need to do
- What a ‘good’ response would look like in terms of focus, use of evidence, presentation etc. (*Access to assessment criteria would be helpful here*)
- What particular themes the student intends to focus on and why
- If there are particular sections (*e.g. in a more formal report*), and what will each section will require the student to do in order to do the assignment well.

Depending on numbers and time available, students can be invited to share their responses with peers for feedback and/or with the tutor.

Once, again, time permitting, this exercise might be revisited at appropriate points and used to help identify any questions students might have (see anonymous questions activity above).
**Activity: what does good practice look like?**

With reference to anonymised examples of student work (selected to demonstrate good practice at appropriate levels) ask students to analyse these examples and discuss what they reveal about what a good assignment looks like. Ask students to focus on the following types of questions:

- What features of the work enable us to recognise it as good?
- In what ways has evidence been used?
- How have arguments, ideas, summaries of evidence etc. been presented and articulated?
- In the case of written work, how has the assignment been structured (e.g. around a smaller number of key themes or arguments) and how have particular sections been presented (introductions, conclusions, transitions between different sections etc.)?

Where preparations for presentations are concerned, although anonymity cannot be granted in the same way, more senior students may well be willing to permit recordings of their presentations to be used in order to help give newer students a better sense of good practice looks like.

**Activity: Weekly planner**

Ask the students to identify, week-by-week, the tasks they will need to complete in order to submit their assignment. Students can discuss this, with peers and/or the tutor, in order to help them evaluate their plans. If it’s a written assignment, encourage reflection on when the writing itself should start.

This exercise can be revisited at subsequent stages so that students can review their progress with the assignment.